



# Maricopa County Animal Care & Control *Cat & Dog Pet Loss*

## *Coping with the Death of Your Pet*

People love their pets and consider them members of their family:

Caregivers celebrate their pets' birthdays, confide in their animals, and carry pictures of them in their wallets. So when your beloved pet dies, it's not unusual to feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your sorrow. But understanding how you grieve and finding ways to cope with your loss can bring you closer to the day when memories bring smiles instead of tears.

What is the grief process?

The grief process is as individual as the person, lasting days for one person or years for another. The process typically begins with denial, which offers protection until individuals can realize their loss. Some caregivers may try bargaining with a higher power, themselves, or even their pet to restore life. Some feel anger, which may be directed at anyone involved with the pet, including family, friends, and veterinarians. The caregivers may also feel guilt about what they did or did not do, and may feel that it is inappropriate to be so upset. After these feelings subside, the caregivers experience true sadness or grief. In their depression, caregivers may withdraw. Acceptance occurs when they accept the reality of their loss and remember their animal companion with decreasing sadness. Remember, not everyone follows these classic stages of grief—some may skip or repeat a stage, or experience the stages in a different order.

How can I cope with my grief?

While grief is a personal experience, a caregiver need not face this loss alone. Many forms of support are available, including pet bereavement counseling services, pet-loss support hotlines, local or on-line

Internet bereavement groups, books, videos, and magazine articles. Here are a few suggestions to help you cope:

Acknowledge your grief and give yourself permission to express it.

Don't hesitate to reach out to others who can lend a sympathetic ear.

Write about your feelings, either in a journal or a poem.

Call your local humane society to see whether it offers a pet-loss support group or can refer you to one. You may also want to consider calling a pet-loss hotline for support. Explore the Internet for pet-loss support groups and coping information.

Prepare a memorial for your pet. (The Humane Society of the United States has a separate information sheet, *Honoring Your Pet's Memory*, to guide you.)

See our list of resources for additional information.

What can I do for my child?

The loss of a pet may be a child's first experience with death. The child may blame himself, his parents, or the veterinarian for not saving the pet. And he may feel guilty, depressed, and frightened that others he loves may be taken from him. Trying to protect your child by saying the pet ran away could cause your child to expect the pet's return and feel betrayed after discovering the truth. Expressing your own grief may reassure your child that sadness is okay and help him work through his feelings.

Is the process more difficult if I'm a senior?

Coping with the loss of a pet can be particularly hard for seniors. Those who live alone may feel a

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loss of purpose and an immense emptiness. The pet's death may also trigger painful memories of other losses and remind caregivers of their own mortality. What's more, the decision to get another pet is complicated by the possibility that the pet may outlive the caregiver, and hinges on the person's physical and financial ability to care for a new pet.

For all these reasons, it's critical that senior pet owners take immediate steps to cope with their loss and regain a sense of purpose. If you are a senior, try interacting with friends and family, calling a pet-loss support hotline, even volunteering at a local humane society. If you know seniors in this situation, direct them to this Web page and guide them through the difficult grieving process.

Will my other pets grieve?

Surviving pets may whimper, refuse to eat or drink, and suffer lethargy, especially if they had a close bond with the deceased pet. Even if they were not the best of friends, the changing circumstances and your emotional state may distress them. Give surviving pets lots of TLC ("tender loving care") and try to maintain a normal routine. It's good for them and for you.

Should I get another pet?

Rushing into this decision isn't fair to you or your new pet. Each animal has his own unique personality and a new animal cannot replace the one you lost. You'll know when the time is right to adopt a new pet after giving yourself time to grieve, carefully considering the responsibilities of pet ownership, and paying close attention to your feelings. When you are ready, remember that your local animal shelter is a great place to find your next special friend.

## AT A GLANCE

When a person you love dies, it's natural to feel sorrow, express grief, and expect friends and family to provide understanding and comfort. Unfortunately, the same doesn't always hold true if the one who died was your companion animal. Many consider grieving inappropriate for someone who has lost "just a pet." Nothing could be further from the truth. The death of your animal friend can be one of the most difficult experiences you face. Animals provide companionship, acceptance, emotional support, and unconditional love during the time they share with

you. If you understand and accept this bond between humans and animals, you've already taken the first step toward coping with pet loss: knowing that it is okay to grieve when your pet dies. Since cats, dogs and other animals commonly kept as pets do not live as long as humans do, owners must face the death of their beloved companions at some point. It is natural and necessary for individuals to grieve at such a time, but compassion and support can help make their grief easier to bear.

We all know how much our companion animals mean to us and appreciate the unique relationships we have with them. Many of us consider them important family members because they provide companionship, acceptance, security and love. They contribute to our health and well-being, and are always there for us.

When a companion animal grows old and sick or is injured accidentally, powerful emotions such as grief, guilt and anger are normal reactions. Dealing with these feelings can be difficult. Many people find it helpful to talk with someone who is familiar with these issues.

## Deciding on euthanasia

Attending to the special needs of children, older adults and differently-abled individuals

Making arrangement for the animal's remains

Helping surviving pets relate to the loss of their companion

Deciding when to bring home a new companion animal.

## Recommended Reading

### Adults

When Your Pet Dies: How to Cope with Your Feelings; Jamie Quackenbush, M.S.W., and Denise Graveline; Simon & Shuster; 1985. Call the American Animal Hospital Association at (800) 252-2242 to order.

### Final Care of Your Pet's Body

Facing the death of one's pet is sad and stressful, and having to decide what to do with the body often adds to that stress. That's why it's best to explore options available for the final care of your pet's body before his death. If your pet dies before you can make

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arrangements, most veterinary hospitals can keep your pet's body for a few days while you consider your options. Unpleasant as this subject may seem, peace of mind comes in knowing exactly what will become of your pet's remains and making the choice that feels right.

Can I bury my pet in a cemetery?

You can bury your pet in a cemetery created specifically for beloved pets.

Pet cemeteries offer a wide range of burial and cremation choices to fit your needs. They perform the duties and services of both a funeral home and cemetery. To locate one, look in the Yellow Pages under "Pet Cemeteries & Crematories." Veterinary clinics and humane societies may also operate pet cemeteries and crematories.

Before choosing a pet cemetery, check to make sure the cemetery sits on "dedicated land." To do this, verify with the cemetery manager that the cemetery's property deed states that the land will always remain a pet cemetery regardless of Ownership. Standards set by the International Association of Pet Cemeteries (800-952-5541) can guide your selection.

How do cemeteries bury pets?

Pets can be buried either in a private plot or in a communal plot. In a private burial, a pet's remains are separately prepared and placed in an individual grave site, crypt, or mausoleum. In a common or communal burial, a pet is buried in the same plot with other deceased pets. Cemeteries that do not provide individual gravestones for pets buried in a communal plot often provide a memorial wall affixed with plaques honoring those pets.

What does cremation entail?

Cremation has become a popular and practical option for handling the bodies of deceased pets. Cremated remains, called "cremains," look like sand-like particles or small pebbles with larger chips of bone. These may be placed in a small urn which you can keep close by and take with you if you love. Cremains can also be buried or scattered in a special section of land set aside by a cemetery. Depending on local government regulations, you can also scatter or bury cremains in a meaningful place, perhaps under a tree planted to memorialize your pet.

Before selecting an animal crematory, find out the cremation procedures. Many animal crematories do mass cremations and then divide the ashes. What this means is that if you don't request an individual cremation, you may receive the cremains of other pets in addition to those of your own.

Is home burial an option?

Check with your city or county government to see whether burying pets in yards is legal in your area. If you choose to bury your pet at home, put the body in a heavy-duty plastic bag, encase it in a secure receptacle such as a wood or metal box, and bury it at least three feet deep. This helps prevent other animals from being attracted by the scent and digging at the grave site. Home burials allow caregivers to be near their pet's remains, but this option may not be suitable if you move frequently.

What is rendering?

Rendering factories process animal bodies (usually those of livestock but sometimes those of companion animals) into products such as tallow and fertilizer. Some pet caregivers, viewing their pet's spirit as distinct from the body, choose to have their pet's body rendered so the remains can be put to further use. Your local animal care and control agency or veterinarian should be able to advise you on the availability of this option in your community.

Remember, regardless of which method you ultimately select to handle your pet's body, your pet will always be close to your heart.

## AT A GLANCE

Everyone who faces the death of an animal companion must decide on the final care of the body. Emotionally draining as this decision can be, it helps to know that you can choose among several options, depending on practical, legal, financial, emotional, and spiritual considerations.

Like many caregivers, you may prefer to leave the decision to your veterinarian or animal shelter. Or you may select home burial, burial at a pet cemetery, or cremation. This information sheet will help you better understand what's available so that you can make the decision that's best for you.

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## Five Simple Ways to Remember Your Pet

While all cultures have developed ways to pay last respects when people die, there are few traditions to mark the passing of our companion animals.

Finding a personal way to say goodbye and honor our pets is important to our emotional health and well-being as we continue our lives without them. Here are five simple ways you can honor the memory of your pet.

Hold a memorial service. Let yourself and others who knew and loved your pet say goodbye and share memories during a memorial service. You can hold a service anywhere that feels right to you—at a pet cemetery, in your backyard, in your pet's favorite park, or at any place that reminds you of special times shared with your pet.

Find a special place for your pet's ashes. Keep your pet's ashes in a beautiful urn or bury them in a meaningful place on your property. Jill, of Pacifica, California, and her family hiked two miles through the snow to put the ashes of their dog, Mighty, to rest in his favorite spot on their mountain property.

Create a living memorial. Let your pet's spirit live again on earth by planting a tree, bush, or flowerbed in your yard. Or attach a small plaque to a flowerpot or vase in your home. Sandy, of Lapeer, Michigan, planted daisies around her mailbox to honor her deceased beagle, Daisy, who had always gone with Sandy to fetch the mail.

Make a scrapbook. Honor and remember your pet by creating a scrapbook or photo collage. Andrea, of Long Beach, California, has a memorial card her eighty-one-year-old father made in memory of her cockatiel, Pumpkin. The card, which includes loving words from the family and several photos, is displayed on Andrea's coffee table alongside a photo of Pumpkin and a redwood box containing Pumpkin's ashes.

Write down your feelings. Put your emotions in writing by composing a poem or story about your pet's life and what made her so special. You might even consider writing a letter to your departed pet, telling him how much you love and miss him. Christine, of Sunnyvale, California, wrote a first-

person account from her cat Maya's perspective as Maya left this world to join other animals in a better place. You can send your pet's story to Kindred Spirits, or you can post it on a Web site.

If you would like to read similar stories like this one, please send e-mail to [kindredspirits@hsus.org](mailto:kindredspirits@hsus.org) for a free sample of Kindred Spirits News.

Where can I make a donation in my pet's name?

An especially meaningful way for some pet owners to honor their departed animal friends is to give a donation in their pet's name to a humane society or other animal protection organization, most of which run special programs that need financial support. Depending on the organization, funds may be used to promote animal care, animal cruelty prevention, humane education, and spaying or neutering. Most local organizations will list the donor and pet in the memorial section of their newsletter. The HSUS offers the Kindred Spirits Memorial Program as a way to memorialize your pet with a lasting to tribute helping all animals.

Your beloved pet will always have a special place in your heart, no matter how you choose to remember your departed companion.

## AT A GLANCE

More than just a pet, she was your playmate and trusted confidante. He was your child and faithful pal. That's why, in addition to handling the necessary arrangements following your pet's death, you may want to offer a lasting tribute to such a special friend. Gestures of remembrance, large or small, provide comfort by celebrating a pet's life and the incredible power of the bond between humans and animals.

## Pet Bereavement Resources & Internet Links

### Pet Bereavement Resources

The Companion Animal Association of Arizona  
602-995-5885 A 24-hour grief-counseling hotline, support groups, and referrals

The Delta Society 425-226-7357

Publishes 20-page Nationwide Pet Bereavement Directory  
PetFriends, Inc., NJ 800-404-7387

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## Related Web Sites

The American Veterinary Medical Association  
<http://www.avma.org/care4pets/avmaloss.htm>

The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement  
[www.aplb.org](http://www.aplb.org)

Cornell University  
[www.vet.cornell.edu/public/petloss](http://www.vet.cornell.edu/public/petloss)

The Delta Society  
[www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org)

Iowa State Pet Loss Group  
<http://www.vetmed.iastate.edu/support>

Lightning Strike  
[http://www.lightning-strike.com/frame\\_pet-loss.htm](http://www.lightning-strike.com/frame_pet-loss.htm)

The Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta  
<http://paws.shopalberta.com/PTRemember.htm>

The Rainbow Bridge  
[www.petloss.com](http://www.petloss.com)

The University of California-Davis Veterinary School of Medicine  
[www.vetnet.ucdavis.edu/petloss/index.htm](http://www.vetnet.ucdavis.edu/petloss/index.htm)

The University of Illinois  
<http://net.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE/>

Other helpful sites  
[www.superdog.com/petloss.htm](http://www.superdog.com/petloss.htm)  
[www.aspca.org/nyr/death.htm](http://www.aspca.org/nyr/death.htm)  
[www.in-memory-of-pets.com](http://www.in-memory-of-pets.com)  
<http://trfn.clpgh.org/animalfriends/genlink2.html>

## Pet Loss & Grief Suggested Reading List

Adults  
Children  
Veterinarians & Animal Care Professionals

Adults

Anderson, M. *Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet*. Peregrine Press, 1994. A comprehensive, compassionate and user-friendly guide to every aspect of pet loss bereavement. In this book you will find out why it's normal and okay to grieve over the loss of a pet. \$11.95.

Butler, C., Hetts, S. and Lagoni, L. *Friends for Life: Loving and Losing Your Animal Companion*. Sounds

True, 1997. Listeners discover they aren't alone in their deep feelings of connection—even of spiritual bonding—with their animal companions. Now three leading authorities on the human-animal bond cast new light on the life-changing relationships with these most loyal, loving of friends. Two audiocassettes, \$18.95.

Hunt, L. and Villalobos, A. *Angel Pawprints; Reflections on Loving and Losing a Canine Companion*. Darrowby Press, 1998. A beautiful anthology of pet memorials expressing the deep love men and women have for their pets. Its 60 rare vintage photographs portray, in black and white, the sparkle in the animals' eyes and the unconditional love in their souls. The heartwarming poems and memoirs date back to the 1800's, written by noted writers as well as anonymous dog lovers, all cherishing the memories of their most faithful companions. \$15.95.

Kowalski, G. *Goodbye, Friend: Healing Wisdom for Anyone Who Has Ever Lost a Pet*. Stillpoint Publishing, 1997. The author explores the connection people feel for their animal companions and the depth of feelings often experienced when these friends die. Faced with the prospect of losing his own dog, Kowalski shares some beautiful reflections on birth, death, and the continuum of life. \$11.95.

Nieberg, H.A., and Fischer, A. *Pet Loss: A Thoughtful Guide for Adults & Children*. HarperPerennial Library, 1996. This thoughtful guide, written by a psychotherapist who specializes in dealing with grief, addresses the suffering of adults and children who experience the death of a pet and provides ways to cope with the situation. \$10.00.

Sife, W. *The Loss of a Pet: New Revised and Expanded Edition*.

Howell Book House, 1998. This book helps newly bereaved pet owners deal with the grief, pain, and confusion that come with the death of a pet. Sife examines all aspects of the human-pet bond and offers unique insights to help readers find personal answers to this very special kind of grief. \$21.95.

Children Biale, R. *My Pet Died*. Tricycle Press, 1996. A special place to record and keep feelings and memories after a beloved pet dies—A proven technique to deal with loss. Use alone or with a parent's help. \$7.95.

Morehead, D. *A Special Place for Charlee: A Child's Companion Through Pet Loss*. Partners In Publishing, 1996. This simply told story is right on the mark in legitimizing a family's, and particularly a child's, grief over the loss of a pet. Its sound counsel and suggestions for coping are gently incorporated into the straightforward story line, and understated black and white drawings eloquently reflect the characters' emotions. Grade level 3-6. \$6.95.

Rylant, C. *Dog Heaven*. Scholastic Trade, 1995. A

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warm, whimsical picture book about the wonderful place where all good dogs go for an endless supply of ham biscuits, good meals and lots of petting.

Beautiful, poignant and charmingly original, here is a book that will touch the heart of anyone who has ever loved a pet. Ages 4-8. \$14.95.

Rylant, C. *Cat Heaven*. Scholastic Trade, 1997. Via simple verse and bold, folk-art illustrations, Cynthia Rylant invites readers to visit Cat Heaven, a place where cats have an eternal supply of catnip, tuna, and warm laps.

Viorst, J. *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. Aladdin Books, MacMillan Publishing Co., 1975. "My cat Barney died last Friday" is the first line in this classic story about a young boy who tries to overcome his grief by listing 10 good things about his beloved cat. Ages 5 and up.

Zolotow, C. *The Old Dog*. HarperCollins Children's Books, 1995. When a young boy finds his old dog dead one morning, he spends the rest of the day thinking about all the good times they had together. Ages 4-8. \$14.95.

Veterinarians, Animal Care Professionals, and Health Care Professionals Adams, C. & Cohen, S. *Pet Loss & Client Grief*. This CD-ROM for the entire veterinary staff teaches the necessary skills to deal sensitively and effectively with clients surrounding the death of a pet. Possible continuing education credit available. Lifelearn, (800) 375-7994. \$129.

Delta Society, PO Box 1080, Renton, WA 98057-1080, 800-869-6898. Delta can supply a Pet Loss and Bereavement Packet (\$15.00), a Directory of Pet Loss Resources (\$3.00), and a Pet Loss Packet Supplement for veterinarians (\$3.00).

Videotapes also available.

Lagoni, L. *The Practical Guide to Client Grief*. AAHA Press, 1997. Ross, C. and Baron-Sorenson, J. *Pet Loss and Human Emotion: Guiding Clients Through Grief*. Taylor & Francis, 1998. \$19.95.

Stutts, J. *Bereavement and the Human-Animal Bond*. *Veterinary Technician* vol. 17, no. 6 (1996):429-433.

## *Rainbow Bridge*

Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge. When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and

sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by. The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent; His eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together, never again to be separated. Author unknown

